Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2010/06/30 : CIA-RDP90-00552R000404650003-1

WASHINGTON TIMES
19 November 1986

# Nicaraguan official tied to cocaine ring

STAT

By Michael Hedges
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

An indictment unsealed yesterday in Miami, charging several Colombians with smuggling nearly 60 tons of cocaine into the United States during the early 1980s, details participation in drug-running by an official of Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista government.

The 50-page document describes the vast empire and brutal methods of the Medellin Cartel that officials say controls about 80 percent of the cocaine shipped to the United States and has been involved in numerous murders.

"This outlines the cartel from the initial growing steps to the distribution lines in the United States," said Richard Gregorie, an assistant U.S. attorney in Miami whose staff spent four years documenting the case.

"It assimilates the Nicaraguan case into the overall dealings of the cartel," he said.

The indictment charges that Federico Vaughan, formerly an assistant to Sandinista Interior Minister Tomas Borge, "used his position within the Nicaraguan government to assist in establishing cocaine laboratories and distribution facilities for the cartel in Nicaragua, arranging for a Nicaraguan military air base to be used as a fuel stop for cartel-operated aircraft, and directed Nicaraguan soldiers to load cocaine aboard aircraft bound for the United States."

An earlier indictment had charged Mr. Vaughan and several others with involvement in a single drug transaction, but had not linked the case to other dealings of the cartel.

The indictment was returned in August, but sealed at the request of the State Department, which was concerned about embarrassing the newly installed government in Colombia, sources said.

It details how four kingpins of the cartel — Jorge Ochoa-Vasquez, Pablo Escobar-Gaviria, Carlos Lehder and Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha — oversaw the production of at least 58 tons of cocaine from 1981 to 1985 and then smuggled the drugs into the United States.

The managers of this huge drug empire — named the Medellin Cartel after the Colombian city that is their hometown — used "an iron fist" to control their holdings, the indictment charges.

"To protect its business operations and enforce its mandates, the cartel corrupted public officials of foreign governments and utilized force and violence, including the murders of informants, discordant employees and opponents," the indictment says.

In preparing the indictment, prosecutors relied on records from production facilities smuggled to them by informants, information from witnesses and wire-tapped telephone conversations between the principals.

Perhaps the best source of information were the photographs, tapes and statements of chief informant Barry Seal, a pilot and convicted smuggler who infiltrated the cartel as part of a deal with the government to avoid prosecution.

Seal would have been the government's chief witness, but he was slain in Baton Rouge last February after a federal court convicted him of unrelated smuggling charges and sentenced him to a halfway house. One of Mr. Ochoa's brothers and two others are charged with the murder.

Before he died, Seal supplied prosecutors with evidence of the cocaine transactions between Mr. Ochoa's lieutenants and Mr. Vaughan, including photographs of the drug-loading operation, prosecutors said.

Mr. Gregorie said Seal refused to enter the witness protection program, preferring the media attention in Louisiana. "We knew they would get him, but we couldn't convince Barry," Mr. Gregorie said. "At least we have an entire record of his testimony if we can ever get this case to trial."

Critics have alleged that the CIA set up the deal involving Mr. Ochoa, Barry Seal and Mr. Vaughan to discredit the Sandinista government. Speculation of CIA involvement was fueled when it was revealed that the plane used by Seal in his dealings with Vaughan was the same plane shot down in the Hasenfus incident. Eugene Hasenfus, a cargo handler, was sentenced to 30 years in a Nicaraguan prison after the plane crash-landed in Nicaragua. Two other crewmen were killed in the crash.

Federal officials have denied a connection between the cases, saying the plane was one of many clandestine aircraft used by underground groups in Latin America.

The indictment details months of phone calls between Seal and Mr. Vaughan as well as meetings the two held in Managua.

The indictment charts the growth of the cartel from a fledgling operation by ambitious and ruthless Colombian hustlers, running one kilo of cocaine at a time into into Miami in 1978, to an organization that moves ton-sized shipments into Europe and the United States.

They achieved this status by eliminating rival gangs and bringing tighter management controls to the illicit business.

According to the indictment, the cartel set up huge laboratories, including one at the Tranquilandia plantation deep in the Amazon jungle. "The cartel maintained records at Tranquilandia which reflect that between September 1983 and March 8, 1984, approximately 23,733 kilograms of cocaine were processed [there]," the indictment charges.

The cartel owned huge caches of weapons, set up brokerage houses around Central and South America where drugs were stored, ran a network of airstrips throughout the Western hemisphere, and kept many pilots on the payroll, the indictment says.

STAT

Continued

Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2010/06/30 : CIA-RDP90-00552R000404650003-1

Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2010/06/30 : CIA-RDP90-00552R000404650003-1



Other indictments returned recently in Miami, charging Americans in several states, show the other end of the cocaine trail and how the cartel plugged into U.S. distribution lines, sources said.

None of the nine charged in yesterday's 39-count indictment are in federal custody. Mr. Gregorie said members of the cartel have bribed and intimidated Colombian officials to avoid extradition.

"We have now reached the point where we know the members of the cartel, we know how it operates, we just can't get enough assistance to stop it," he said.

Mr. Ochoa was arrested in Spain on evidence developed by Interpol, but after a heated dispute between the United States and Colombia over which country should prosecute him, the Spanish government extradited him to Colombia.

In August, he was released on a small bond by a Colombian judge in Cartagena after a hearing on unrelated bull-smuggling charges. He then disappeared. High-ranking federal officials said the judge was bribed and threatened with death if he did not release Mr. Ochoa. The judge has been fired and is under criminal investigation.

According to American sources, Medellin Cartel members were responsible for the assassination on Monday of Col. Jaime Ramirez-Gomez, who was described by a U.S. drug enforcement official in Bogota as "the only thing left here of an active drug enforcement effort."

Col. Ramirez-Gomez was machine-gunned to death by three men as he, his wife and two children returned home from a weekend trip outside Bogota. His wife and children were seriously wounded.

"Pablo Escobar [one of the cartel members indicted in Miami yesterday] had a contract on him and that contract has been carried out," said a Drug Enforcement Administration source in Colombia.

Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2010/06/30 : CIA-RDP90-00552R000404650003-1